

Common Sense on Digital Life

What's the Issue?

We may think of our kids' online, mobile, and technological activities as "digital life," but to them it's just life. In their world, being able to connect and communicate 24/7 from just about any location is normal – and expected! Between kindergarten and fifth grade, kids go through rapid growth in learning about many topics, including digital media technologies. From playing games on their mom or dad's cell phone, to learning how to point and click a mouse, to navigating online by themselves, kids this age are participating in a connected culture.

Why Does It Matter?

Young children need to learn early how to make good choices so they can take advantage of the powerful technologies available to them. And to make these good choices, kids need parental guidance.

The stakes are high because our kids' technological abilities can be greater than their maturity and judgment. Having unrestricted access to information and people can result in gaining a wealth of information and experiences. But it can also mean accessing inappropriate content and making inappropriate contact with others. The difference between a great experience and an iffy one lies in the decisions kids make. Just as kids learn to eat properly, swim safely, or drive a car carefully, they need to know how to live in the digital world responsibly and respectfully. Their ultimate success depends on their abilities to use digital media to create, collaborate, and communicate well with others. Those who master these skills in using digital tools will benefit from the digital world's awesome power.

common sense says

Use bookmarks and safe search. Teach your child to bookmark his or her favorite sites. This way, your child is less likely to go somewhere online you don't want. Use safe search options on Web browsers, such as Google or Bing, to make sure your child can search safely.

Consider using filtering and blocking software. Some parents find these tools to be useful to help protect younger children from accessing inappropriate content.

Have older siblings help. Have your older children help teach your younger children how to be responsible and safe online. Let the older ones know that you want them to help you protect their little brothers or sisters online.

Share wisdom. Kids often don't understand the implications of their actions. But we do. So we have to remember to extend our basic parenting wisdom to the digital world. We teach kids to choose their words carefully, play nicely with others, and respect their teachers. Now we have to extend those lessons to a vast, invisible world.

Pass along your values. As a parent, you can translate your values into the digital world and help kids understand the implications of their actions. Oftentimes the same rules that apply in the real world apply online, such as "be nice to others," "don't say mean things," and "think critically about information."

Seek balance. It's hard to know how much freedom to give kids. We want them to explore, enjoy, communicate, and create. We also want to be sure they are protected. If our kids are going to thrive with digital media, we must balance the negative with the positive, privacy with protection. As our children grow, they need more independence and privacy. But parents have to be sure their kids know how to be safe and responsible before letting them loose.

Keep an open mind. We don't see the world the way our kids do. And we don't help our kids when we judge their lives through the lens of a non-digital world. It's important for us to understand that our kids will spend much of their lives in a connected world, where everyone creates and communicates. We need to help them to enjoy it and learn from it.